

From the Diary of Bishop John Francis Norton – 1925

Inscription....

*Diary kept for my dearest Mother
on the P. & O Steamer “Mongolia”
by John F. Norton
With the Australian National
Pilgrimage to Rome & Lourdes 1925.*

19th May (3rd day in Lourdes)

This morning I was permitted to say Mass on the altar of Our Lady’s grotto. This great privilege was possible through the kindness of the Bishop, who by virtue of his position, is one of those who can celebrate in the Grotto. Today he gave me his turn. During the Mass celebrated before my own, I was engaged in giving Holy Communion at the rails which form part of the railing enclosing the Grotto. To do so was almost as great an honour as to celebrate the Divine Mysteries. When my turn came, I said the Mass of the Apparition on the very spot where that blessed event took place. Just above my head is the Grotto where Our Lady appeared, and just where I stand little Bernadette must have knelt. The great candelabra that never cease to hold countless burning candles are making the cavern glow, while outside countless pilgrims heedless of the rain that is falling are either preparing for or making their thanksgiving after Holy Communion.



The next great event of today was the visit of our pilgrimage to Monsignor Schaeffer, the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes who has ruled this famous diocese since 1899. Dr Schaeffer’s house is beautifully situated not far from the Basilica, and to it we all went about ten o’clock. We gathered in front of the Chalet though the rain was falling in torrents, and in a little time the Bishop came out on the top of the steps that lead up to the house. Dr Mannix first introduced us priests to him and then he began to deliver his address to us. He told us his English was very bad, but prompted by Dr Mannix, his words flowed on in a very creditable way. The great distance we had come seemed to deeply impress him, and he thanked us not only for visiting the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, but also thus come to pay a compliment to himself. He then told us how moved he had been by the tremendous cheer had been given him by the Irish Pilgrimage the previous year and that he loved Ireland and the Irish. He knew that we were all Irish or descendants of Irish parents, and that our faith came from Ireland. Then he said “you are not the first Australian pilgrimage to Lourdes”. Then he told us of an Australian chaplain, (we learned afterwards that it was Fr O’Donnell, who had been arrested by the English soldiers in Ireland) who, when he was told he could not get permission to say Mass in the Grotto, as he was not the head of a pilgrimage, gave the very ingenious answer “I am the head of the pilgrimage”, “Where then are your pilgrims”? There are fifty seven thousand Australian pilgrims of Our Lady of Lourdes in France”.

It was a splendid answer and evidently appealed strongly to the Bishop. So he said, “You are the living Australian pilgrims but there are fifty seven thousand other pilgrims from your land, permanent pilgrims of Our Lady of Lourdes sleeping in the soil of France”.

We then knelt for the venerable old man's blessing, he is now in his 72nd year, and then we were all photographed. The Lourdes photographers are very speedy in their methods. An hour later, proofs were being shown and orders being received.

Rain was still falling, but as we had a free hour, I made up my mind to do the Stations of the Cross. The Way of the Cross in Lourdes is wonderful. It is up the mountain side with the 12th Station right at the top, and the distance one walks is almost an English mile. A party of the pilgrims were going up the road towards the 1st Station and they asked me to lead them in the Stations of the Cross. The 1st Station is approached by a flight of marble steps, 28 in number, an imitation of the Holy Stairway which Our Lord went up, going into Pilate's Praetorium- which Holy Stair is now preserved in St John Lateran in Rome. We ascended the marble steps on our knees, as is the custom, although they were very wet with the constant rain, and we stood in front of the 1st Station. It is composed of 10 life-size figures in bronze, and is the work of Raffl, a famous Paris artist who completed these fine Stations of the Cross in 1912. Some of the other Stations have only five figures, but most of them have eight or nine and the 12th has fourteen. Although in bronze the artist has given a wonderful expression to the faces of the figures, from that of agony on the face of Our Lord to that of scorn and contempt on those of the haughty Roman soldiers. Indeed they are all so life like that one almost feels that the Sacred Passion is being enacted once more before our eyes.

We made our way from Station to Station till we had the Way of the Cross completed, and then we made our descent of the steep road that leads back to the Basilica. Before reaching it, we met the Celtic Cross that was erected by Catholic Ireland after her National Pilgrimage of 1913. Most of the Stations of the Cross have been presented by French Dioceses, but Ireland has done well in thus placing her own special form of Cross at the conclusion of the Lourdes Stations. Indeed, it is well worthy, both of Ireland and the places where it is placed, for it is as the Lourdes Guide Manuel calls it "A masterpiece".

In the afternoon it was considered inadvisable to bring the Bishop again to the Baths, so I was free to take part in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament in which the Australian pilgrims were given a special place.

When it was over I remained and said my Office in front of the Grotto. Again at night there was the great procession with the lighted candles, this time of enormous proportions, for during the last twenty four hours several pilgrimages have arrived to honour the Virgin of the Pyrenees. I did my best to join in the singing of the Lourdes hymn- "Ave, Ave, Ave Maria" but after a while I had to be content with repeating the words to myself, for the French sing in a very high key, far beyond my range. The procession concluded as on the previous night, and then I brought my procession candle round to the Grotto where I hope it was burned on the following day.

As this was to be my last night in Lourdes, I felt loath to leave the Grotto, where numbers of pilgrims remained praying till a late hour. Praying is the main occupation of Lourdes. Everyone seems to be either coming or going to the churches or the Grotto, and praying is the occupation of them all. I could see no sign of human respect. The Faith is supreme in Lourdes and its open practise in every form seems a duty no one thinks of shirking.